

## Civil Service Reform in Comparative Perspective: The Case of Local Government Change in Mexico and the United States

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These "citizen advocates" are as ready to fight City Hall, as they are to support it.

The period from the late 1970s through the early 1990s brought a reaction to the new public administration. The work of politically conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation sought to re-emphasize *executive leadership* as the core concept in personnel management. These groups reintroduced concepts of bureaucracy from the 1930s, when an earlier generation of academics sought to reshape the bureaucracy in support of a President with whom they agreed politically and ideologically. This viewpoint (in contrast to the 1930s efforts) explicitly rejects the concept of neutral competence. The "proper" role of the bureaucrat is to seek the interests of the President. This attitude is derived from efforts to distinguish between statutory enactments and regulations. Regulations are deemed nothing more than the embodiment of the discretionary choices of prior administrations.

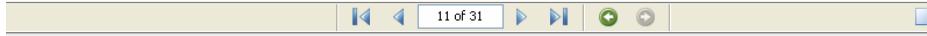
minimum, the standards by which to judge operations are those of the business firm. These views even call into question the advisability of a career civil service (Devine, 1987; Heatherly and Pines, 1989). This is the political environment within which civil service reform takes place today.

### CIVIL SERVICE REFORM IN SUMMIT COUNTY<sup>3</sup>

In 1984 voters of Summit County Ohio approved a significant restructuring of the government of that county. A central feature of the political initiative to approve a new home-rule Charter was the public and media perception that the civil service system was broken (Clark, 1979). Restructuring ranged beyond changes in civil service.

"the civil service system was broken"  
And still is!

<sup>3</sup> Much of the information presented in this section is derived from a study of the Summit County personnel system by the Department of Public Administration & Urban Studies, The University of Akron (January 2002-May 2003).



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study from 1997. A key provision of the salary system was to be the use of merit-based performance appraisals to determine salary increases for employees. However, partly because the County Council was unconvinced that the performance appraisal system in place was workable, in 1999 the Council rejected this element of the current pay system. The salary system was implemented but there was no provision for employees to get a pay raise, except through a general wage increase, or a promotion. Although "real" promotions are infrequent, many employees get pay raises by being assigned a new job title. Thus, the current practice is a perpetual game of title changes to adjust salaries.

There are other defects. For example, educational requirements are non-existent for virtually all positions, even for some professional and technical positions. Furthermore, the qualifications for most jobs are so minimal anyone can qualify. Ultimately, political connections become as good as any a basis for hiring. This ensures that "the way we have always done it" is the watchword. "Title-shopping" is rampant. There is neither a mathematical, nor a career basis, for salaries in the three salary systems for classified employees. The operational basis for having these salary systems for classified employees (administrative, technical, professional) was never applied to actual positions. Salary comparability was not a factor in developing the salary system for employees.

Morale among county employees is low. The "system" is stacked against a person who seeks a *career* in the public service. It is little wonder anyone stays. The salary system is "up-side-down." Employees most likely to be paid an "equitable" wage are those in the lowest pay categories. Technical professionals and the senior managers are the most likely to suffer salary compression. Those with more experience, training and responsibility have less comparable salaries. Furthermore, having to train new employees

or a good employee, new knowledge practices and processes are rare in Summit County.

The defects in the system are instructive. They are instructive because of political and popular reaction to the system. After twenty years of government under a new Charter, the perception of "corruption" and simple incompetence among county employees remain. Equally important, it is the salary system that is at the heart of problems. Unless employees and politicians view the salary system as fair, the entire civil service system is suspect. Thus, civil service reform, in Summit County, as in the State of Mexico, begins with the salary structure, not other elements of a civil service system.

**THE SUMMIT COUNTY PERSONNEL SYSTEM IN PERSPECTIVE**

What are the lessons of the continuing efforts to reform the civil service system in Summit County? Drawing upon experience with the salary classification study and interviews with Summit County officials, key lessons are:

*Perceptions.* The public perceives that the traditional civil service system currently in place in the City of Akron is the "right" way to do things. Thus, the less rule-driven and structured system of Summit County suffers by comparison. The city system remains the exemplar (Collins, 2002). Until the County system "looks" like the City model in the public mind it is defective. As with any broadly held public attitude, these views are not limited to the public. The "victims" of the current system, county civil service employees, are the most vocal and critical about the county arrangement. Most of the reform efforts of Summit County have been directed toward addressing public perceptions, rather than a formal analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the present system. The creation of the Human Resources

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tion of change is more complicated and time-consuming than the public desires and taxes public patience. Both formal and informal politics come into play. Changes introduced by altering the legal framework were an end in itself. It became a symbol of reform, without a concomitant desire for the realities of reform. Few in politics and few within the state or county bureaucracy were truly interested in reform. Complicating the process still more, the state has put numerous roadblocks in the way of implementation. Few political leaders are interested in the "details" of reform or the new practices that those reforms imply. To paraphrase Roke (1986), in the modern era it is easier to make a constitution than "to run a constitution."

**Salaries.** Mechanisms for determining initial salaries and for calculating salary adjustments are at the heart of the matter. Morale problems among employees and perceptions of "corruption" by the public are based upon the administration of the salary classification system. Old-fashioned ideas of hiring good people and keeping them are still the basis of the public assessment of personnel systems. At the most critical and "public" levels, the County does neither well. Those most adversely affected by salary inequities are senior staff and those in technical occupations (Foster, Freas and Wilson). This disparity is derived from two phenomena. First, the most visible appointees—those selected through patronage processes—have low salaries to avoid a public uproar. The salary survey from the University of Akron study showed that persons with similar responsibilities in non-patronage positions in other regions of the country (i.e., "professionals" such as county managers and their deputies) receive considerably

a county civil service system than the ambivalence toward merit-based raises. Public employee unions, many politicians and employees are almost universal in their opposition to such a concept. One reason for this is that few employees, or supervisors, believe that any of the existing methods for assessing merit in performance are fair or realistic. If everyone is deemed "satisfactory" regardless of performance, then merit-based salary systems become experience-based systems. If employees believe that ratings are based upon the whims or prejudices of supervisors, then they will seek the "refuge" of longevity pay to protect themselves from the unfairness and inequities of the system. Finding a performance appraisal system that can be implemented easily, and is credible with employees and supervisors, is akin to the search for the Holy Grail. The 1999 salary reforms in Summit County collapsed with the failure to find a performance appraisal system and the County Council could agree on was fair. Politics played a negative role. For those who know how to negotiate the "merit-system," the lack of an adequate performance appraisal process is an advantage. This is true in the situation in Summit County for many years (Foster, Freas and Wilson).

**Promotion and retention.** The public image of the Summit system was of a government overburdened with inefficient and incompetent employees who worked for the county because no one else would hire them. The near classic image of government as the employer of last resort became a self-reinforcing image as the public vigorously opposed salary increases by applying the dual logic that county employees were already overpaid and under-worked. Thus, dedicated professionals entering the public ser-

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vice encounter low wages, long hours and few rewards. The University of Akron study found the system has devolved into a shell-game of title changes and phantom promotions. Professionals working in positions requiring substantial education and experience for appointment are left with virtually no means of promotion or career advancement. Not surprisingly, turnover among technical professionals is higher than in other job classes (Foster, Freas and Wilson).

The focus on salary levels and career advancement has had one positive benefit: the salaries of county technical professionals were the focal point of analyses in 1997 and 2002. Recruitment and retention of competent technical professionals have become a universal concern among politicians and managers. The first salary analysis helped raise salaries, but other defects in the system meant that the results were less than positive. The 2002 salary analysis emphasizes both current salary comparability and a career perspective.

**CIVIL SERVICE REFORM IN THE STATE OF MEXICO**

**The Policy Process**

As in much of the world, politics dominates policy processes in the State of Mexico. Issues and concerns that emerge as "policy issues" have been reviewed and discussed by political parties and certain interest groups before being presented to Congress by the executive. Any policy option under review is the product of coalition building and negotiation, making it difficult for the

stem from agreements among: a) large private corporations, b) organized interest groups, such as labor unions and c) managerial groups.

Minority social organizations are excluded and in some parts of Mexico have resorted to confrontation and urban disorder. For example, civil service reform initiatives currently under consideration are the result of consensus among the political parties in Mexico (National Action Party and Institutional Revolutionary Party) and the Federal Executive. In the State of Mexico, policy making and decision-making are tightly controlled by a small number of persons, groups and party leaders. In a "closed" system in which few participate, the influence of the managerial sector and the larger education sector unions and public employees is considerable in public policy formation. Peasant groups, grassroots and neighborhood organizations have less influence. A rare instance of success by "outsiders" is the case of the San Salvador Atenco peasants, who sought more equitable payment for lands expropriated for a new airport. The concerns of the peasant landowners for many years were met with political indifference. The financial commitments already made by the State of Mexico were considerable, yet the project was successful. The airport project was canceled and the land expropriation project abolished.

In the State of Mexico, the executive authority has the preponderant role in policy formulation. The Governor introduces most initiatives. Historically, the Governor's party (for most of the last seven decades, PRD) also held the majority in the state Congress, seemingly guaranteeing an initiatives' approval. Support of the

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